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ABSTRACT

To compare American and English audience attitudes after viewing the television production of "Roots," a study was devised whereby sample groups from both countries were surveyed regarding their perceptions of program content and its historical accuracy, their judgments regarding the show's portrayal of slavery, and their personal racial attitudes. Results of the survey indicated the following: both American and British samples revealed heavy exposure to "Roots"; both audience samples considered the series to be a credible portrayal of the conditions of slavery; the British viewers, however, thought that the blacks suffered more than white immigrants at the same period, while 26% of the American audience disagreed; more British than American viewers regarded the present day black as equal to the white in trustworthiness and incentive; both groups revealed a low correlation between the viewing of "Roots" and changes in racial attitudes; and American nonviewers of "Roots" tended to avoid the show more because of their negative racial attitudes, while for British nonviewers different tastes in programing affected their choices. (Tables are included.) (MAI)

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ROOTS AND RACIAL ATTITUDES: A CROSS-NATIONAL STUDY

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Introduction

The recent televised adaptation of Alex Haley's best-selling book Roots became a national television phenomenon in America. ABC-TV's 12-hour, eight-episode series not only attracted the largest audience in the history of American television,[1] but also occasioned a unique reaction across the United States. For eight consecutive nights in January 1977, tens of millions of Americans were exposed to Roots' highly emotional portrayal of slavery in which blacks were casually and deliberately dehumanized and brutalized by whites. Various media accounts reported how viewers expressed feelings of guilt, agony, horror, anger and sympathy in response to the series.

Given the unusual public reaction to Roots, many media critics and observers also argued that Roots had profound impact on racial attitudes of Americans and race relations in America. They argued that Roots' dramatic portrayal sensitized the white audience to the everyday realities of slavery in contrast to the vague generalities discussed in history texts and classes. Thus, Time (11) magazine in its cover story review (after a critical preview dismissing it as "middle-class Mandingo") described Roots as a potential turning point in U.S. race relations.

The present study investigated the relationship between racial attitudes and viewing of Roots in a cross-national setting by examining audience attitudes toward the series among American and British adult viewers. The study attempted to provide empirical answers to the following questions: How did the audience in the two predominantly-white countries, with rather dif-

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[1]Seven of the eight Roots episodes ranked among the top-ten in all-time television ratings, with between 62% and 68% audience shares and the last episode recorded a 71% audience share.

ferent orientations toward relations with blacks, view and react to the specific historical portrayal in the Roots series? What differences are to be found between American viewers and British viewers of Roots in their perceptions of the program content, particularly its historical depiction of American whites and blacks? Did American viewers and British viewers perceive the accuracy or believability of the show's portrayal of slavery? Finally did racial attitudes between viewers and non-viewers of Roots differ for American and British audiences?

Mass communication researchers have often documented the limited direct effect of mass media content and have isolated a number of intervening audience mechanisms, such as selective exposure and selective perception, to account for the lack of direct effects. Cooper and Jahoda (2) provided a classic example of selective exposure and perception in their demonstration of how prejudiced persons became immune to messages constructed to change their prejudice. The study showed that when cartoons intended to ridicule bigotry were shown to bigoted persons, the message was avoided or distorted through various defense mechanisms.

Recently, a number of researchers have studied the question of prejudice and racial attitudes by examining viewer attitudes toward racial-oriented television entertainment programs dealing with aggressive characterizations, such as All in the Family, Sanford and Son, and the Jeffersons (1,4,6,7,8, 9,10,13). Most of this research has upheld the validity of both selective exposure and selective perception hypotheses among the audiences of these programs, with the familiar result of the reinforcement of existing attitudes. With respect to All in the Family, four studies have examined the question of prejudice reinforcement in cross-cultural or other cultural settings. Vidmar and Rokeach (13), Surlin and Tate (9), and Tate and Surlin (10) have

examined the relationship between prejudice and viewing and perceptions of the series among both American and Canadian viewers. They have shown a consistent relationship within both cultural settings between high dogmatism or ethnocentrism and liking and agreement with Archie Bunker, the major bigoted character in the series. However, in a fourth study of the Dutch audience of All in the Family, Wilhoit and Bock (15) found that the show did not have reinforcement effect on persons with high ethnocentrism or life style intolerance.

Was this difference, then, due to cultural difference between the Canadian audience and the Dutch audience? Could it be assumed that Canadian viewers of All in the Family were more similar to American viewers than to Dutch viewers in their expressions of dogmatism or ethnocentrism? Cultural background cannot be ignored in examining viewer attitudes toward particular television programs. In fact, Surlin and Tate (9) showed that cultural background was the most important factor in predicting the perceived humor of the specific vignette appeared in All in the Family. In another study, Tate and Surlin (10) showed that Canadian viewers of All in the Family did not see as much humor or perceive the show as realistic as did American viewers. Cross-cultural study of television audiences then must be concerned with specific themes and formats of the television program, the social relationships between the characters, and the socio-cultural context within which the specific television event takes place.

Though most of the television programs exported/imported across national boundaries consists of drama (12), little is known about the cultural effects of serious television entertainment programs in single cultures, much less in foreign cultures. Roots was a unique television program series in the sense that it dealt with an historical theme with considerable current social

significance--the conditions that preceded the racial climate in America today. Media critics in America described Roots' phenomenal popularity in terms of the strength of its thematic content and the power of its visual images (5,14). The central purpose of this study was to investigate the apparent impact of Roots in both its original American setting and in a country somewhat further removed from the issue, namely Great Britain.

Method

Two groups of respondents, American adults and British adults, took part in the present study. The U.S. sample was drawn from a large Mid-Western city and its suburbs, using the random-digit method of sampling telephone numbers. About 1,200 randomly drawn telephone numbers were contacted by trained interviewers during the week of January 31 to February 6, 1977 immediately following the broadcast of Roots' last episode on January 30, 1977. A total of 529 respondents answered to the survey and constituted the U.S. sample, with an adjusted completion rate of 64% after disconnected and business numbers were taken into account.

The British sample was drawn from the 1,258 viewing panel members utilized by the British Broadcasting Corporation to study the reactions to specific television fare across time. A total of 805 panel members responded to the mail survey conducted by the BBC Audience Research Division which represented a completion rate of 64%. Those who completed the questionnaire matched the total British population rather well in terms of sex, age and social class. The largest difference was for social class, with 63% of Roots viewers being working class compared to a 70% estimate for the population as a whole. A difference of this magnitude is not surprising for a serious entertainment program shown on BBC.

The British survey was completed in May 1977 after BBC-1 had broadcast the Roots series. In contrast to the one week's concentrated presentation on ABC, BBC broadcast the series over a month's time--three consecutive nights over the Easter weekend and on each of the following three Sunday evenings.

The two surveys were somewhat different in their questionnaire and sample design, but contained several common questions to elicit similar viewer reactions to Roots. The BBC survey questionnaire contained more items than the U.S. questionnaire using both adjective scales and descriptive statements to measure viewer attitudes toward the program in addition to the forced-choice items used in the U.S. survey. The comparable questions asked and the responses are presented in Table 1.

-- INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE --

Results

Both American and British samples reported heavy exposure to Roots; about 73% of American respondents and 68% of British respondents watched at least part of the series. About 30% of American respondents and 24% of British respondents reported watching the entire series. The viewing rates for the American sample were close to those reported in a national sample by Harris (3). Not surprisingly, the viewing rates for the British panel sample were somewhat higher than for the viewing public as a whole when compared to daily television rating figures compiled on separate samples by BBC Audience Research. Daily viewing surveys on separate samples put the average viewing figure per episode in Britain at 34%, compared to 50% per episode viewing rate for the panel sample. (On the other hand, these viewing rates would be perfectly consistent with the refusal of non-Roots viewers to participate in this particular questionnaire.) While this 34% viewing

TABLE 1

PERCENT RESPONSES TO ROOTS AND RACIAL ATTITUDE ITEMS*

Items	U.S. Sample(N=529)	British Sample(N=805)
1. Hardships of slavery compared to those of white immigrants		
Roughly the same	26%	6%
Worse	33	38
Much worse	29	44
2. Blacks in the U.S.A. have poorer housing, education and jobs than whites. Is this due to		
Blacks themselves	25	4
Discrimination	42	25
Combination of both	33	71
3. Who are more trustworthy?		
Blacks	5	0
Whites	23	6
Both equally	72	94
*4. Who was the most respected character in the series?		
Kunta Kinte	37	37
Chicken George	26	20
Kizzy	8	23
Tom	1	6
Fiddler	5	2
*5. What effect did the series have on your views?		
No reply	25	19
Little or no effect	29	32
Reinforced existing views	7	13
Greater appreciation, understanding, shame	39	36

*On items 4 and 5, percentages were calculated for only those who watched at least part of the Roots series. N for the U.S. viewers is 386 and N for the British viewers is 550.

rate was well above the 19% average figure for BBC Film Programs shown at the same time slot for the twelve weeks preceding Roots, Roots failed to evoke the same level of attention from the British TV audience than it had in America.

Both British and American viewers of Roots considered the series to be a credible portrayal of the conditions of slavery. On a five-point scale running between "entirely believable" at one end and "not at all believable" at the other end, only 13% of the British sample described Roots at the fourth or fifth (negative) position on the scale. Only 6% of American viewers said the historical portrayal of Roots was "not very accurate" compared to 45% of American viewers who said the series was very accurate and 49% who said it was somewhat accurate. Only 4% of American viewers described the historical accuracy of the show's depiction of blacks as "not very accurate" compared to 8% who felt the depiction of whites was "not very accurate."

Table 1 shows the percentage of persons who responded to the common items on the two surveys. Large differences were found between American and British respondents in their racial perceptions and attitudes--particularly the item most centrally touched on in Roots. When asked how the condition of black slavery compared to the condition white immigrant groups to America had to face, 82% of British respondents vs. 62% of American respondents said it was "worse" or "much worse." Only 6% of British respondents thought what blacks went through during slavery was no worse than what white immigrants to America endured, compared to 26% of American respondents. In both samples, 12% said they didn't know or gave a response that did not fit into one of these three categories.

The two samples also differed on racial attitudes not centrally touched on in Roots, with British respondents expressing more tolerant or "liberal"

attitudes than American respondents. About 94% of British respondents considered whites and blacks to be equal in trustworthiness, compared to 72% of American respondents. British respondents were also less likely than American respondents to consider blacks themselves solely responsible for their current low level of housing, education and jobs in the United States. The series, then, played to audiences in the two countries that were rather different in their underlying racial attitudes.

The British and American audiences also differed in their preferences for Roots characters. Not surprisingly, Kunta Kinte, an original African ancestor and major character in the series, was cited as the most respected character in the series in both groups of viewers. However, British viewers named Kizzy (Kinte's daughter) second and Chicken George a close third, while American viewers named Chicken George a close second and Kizzy a distant third. The greater popularity of Chicken George in the American sample may have been due to his having fulfilled the American dream of "making it" and thus reinforcing the view that other blacks with sufficient determination and character could have made their way out of slavery as well.

What effect did Roots have on its viewers? A common assumption among many viewers (and probably the producers of the program) was that once white Roots viewers had witnessed the vivid portrayal of slavery in the series, their appreciation of the historical plight of blacks would be enhanced, which in turn would lead to more sympathetic or empathic views in other racial attitude areas. However, Table 1 shows that when asked a direct open-ended question on how the program had affected them, 29% of American viewers and 32% of British viewers claimed that the series had little effect on their views. At the same time, 39% of American viewers and 36% of British viewers said that it had given them a greater

appreciation or understanding about the situation of blacks or had strengthened perceptions of the horrors of slavery.

The relation between viewing Roots and racial attitudes was more appropriately tested through comparisons between Roots viewers and non-viewers in both samples on the racial attitudes described in Table 1. For this comparison, about 20% of blacks in the U.S. sample were not included to eliminate the confounding effect of race on the dependent variables.

The relation between viewing Roots and racial attitudes was somewhat different in the two cultural contexts, as shown in Table 2. Table 2 shows a significant 18% difference between the two American groups on the racial attitude item dealing with trustworthiness and a 10% difference on the position that black slaves had it no worse than white immigrant groups. In contrast, no significant difference was found for British viewers and non-viewers of Roots in their racial attitudes and on some items, the two groups were virtually identical. Moreover, British viewers and non-viewers gave virtually identical responses to a social distance scale measuring racial attitudes in more behavioral terms.

-- INSERT TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE --

In the U.S. sample, Roots viewers did express more liberal racial attitudes than non-viewers. About 87% of white viewers were in favor of the principle of open housing compared to 75% of non-viewers; conversely only 11% of viewers were opposed to open housing, compared to 24% of non-viewers, a difference that is also significant at the .01 level as was the item on trustworthiness. Though statistically insignificant, the fact that Roots viewers were about 10 percentage points higher in perceiving what blacks went through in slavery as no worse than what happened to white immigrants suggests that many non-viewers selectively avoided Roots because

TABLE 2

COMPARISONS FOR VIEWERS AND NON-VIEWERS
ON THEIR RACIAL ATTITUDES

	U.S. Sample (N=430)*			British Sample (N=805)		
	Viewers (N=303)	Non-viewers (N=127)	Chi-square Probability	Viewers (N=550)	Non-viewers (N=255)	Chi-square Probability
Who are more trustworthy?						
Whites	23%	41%		6%	6%	
Blacks	0	0		0	0	
Both equally	77	59	.01	94	94	N.S.
Cause of blacks' poorer housing, education and jobs than whites'						
Blacks themselves	37	40		3	5	
Discrimination	46	44		27	23	
Combination of both	17	14	N.S.	66	70	N.S.
Hardships of slavery compared to those of white immigrants						
Roughly the same	30	40		6	6	
Worse	41	36		37	39	
Much worse	29	24	N.S.	47	40	N.S.

*Black respondents (N=99) were not included in the test.

they were already less sympathetic to its content. In fact, many non-viewers of Roots in the U.S. sample said that the subject matter of the series was "disturbing" or "unappealing" when asked why they did not watch the program. The fact that this difference is also less than that found for attitude items not directly covered in the program (namely blacks' trustworthiness and open housing) also suggests that this 10% difference may have held even prior to Roots having been shown. This explanation is supported by the reduction of this 10% gap after a multiple regression analysis on this slavery item was performed using the other attitude questions and demographic variables (except race) as independent variables.

In contrast, hardly a suggestion of a significant difference was found between British viewers and non-viewers of Roots on any of their racial attitudes, which suggests that selective exposure to Roots was not at work for the British audience. It appears that here also the program did not influence racial attitudes with only minor differences between viewers and non-viewers being found in the perception of hardships of slavery. However, 47% of viewers felt that black immigrants had it "much worse" compared to 40% of non-viewers, which is in line with the strengthening or polarizing influence that 36% of British viewers claimed the program had had on their views. This difference was also decreased when a multiple regression analysis was performed on the data.

The conclusion of the present study, then, is that American viewers and British viewers of the Roots series did differ in their attitudes but more so in terms of prior attitudes than on attitudes related to the program itself. While some selectivity in viewing is suggested for the American sample, there is little to suggest that anti-black Britishers avoided the series in any greater numbers than those who were pro-black. In contrast to

the findings by Tate and Surlin, persons in the culture into which the foreign television show was imported apparently perceived the show to be as believable as did persons in the domestic culture and may have been even more receptive to its message.

At the same time the present study also demonstrated that racial attitudes toward U.S. blacks in Britain may have already reached a ceiling effect, leaving far less room for a program such as Roots to have an effect on its audience than in the United States, where the racial issue has been far more central in day-to-day life.

Serious television entertainment as exemplified by Roots may evoke different interest and reactions from foreign viewers than less serious television entertainment. While further study is needed to assess differential effects of various imported television programs when they are shown in a foreign land, it is hard to imagine a program that prior to its presentation would have a foreign audience more receptive to its message than in the country for which it was originally produced.

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